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THE TREE OF LIGHT

JAMES A. B. SCHERER

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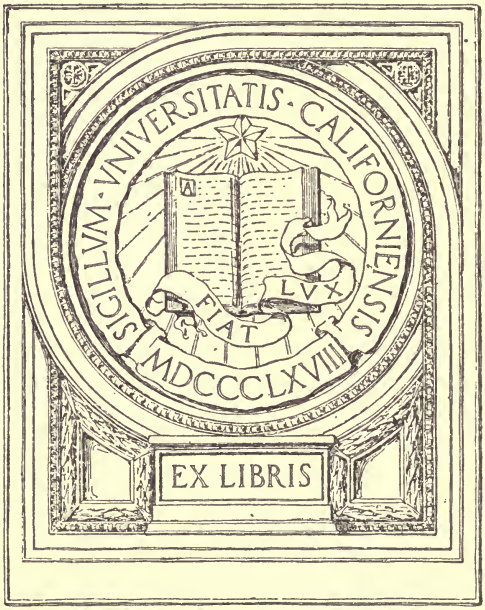

THE TREE OF LIGHT

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BY

JAMES A. B. SCHERER

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TO MY WIFE

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PREFACE

The first national hero of English-speaking peoples is Caradoc, son of Shakspeare's Cymbeline. He lived five hundred years before King Arthur, and his story is just as romantic. English literature is rich in the treatment of Arthur, while the only literary treatment of Caradoc is a quaint dramatic poem by William Mason. Tradition tells us that Caradoc met Paul while in Rome, and afterward brought us our Christmas. He is also traditionally associated, albeit in conflict, with the British Druids and their practice of human sacrifice. The present writer became interested in his story through reading a pamphlet about him by Edward Hicks, published at Birmingham in 1906, and based on the Roll of John Rous. To that pamphlet this tale is especially indebted, as well as to the Annals of Tacitus and—in a different fashion—The

Golden Bough of Sir J.G. Frazer. Very slight is our actual knowledge of Caradoc. We do know that he was simple, brave, human. "The Tree of Light" is fiction, based on a fairly sound tradition. It is a greatly amplified version of the short story, "How Christmas Came into England," published in the Christmas number of Scribner's Magazine for 1909, and copyrighted by Charles Scribner's Sons. I wish to thank the Messrs. Scribner for permission to use in this volume the two drawings they had made by Frank Craig for the original story. For the name of the book I am indebted to Mrs. Julia Crawford Ivers.

JAMES A. B. SCHERER.

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THE ALTAR UNDER THE OAK

THE TREE OF LIGHT

Many great men have come out of old Warwickshire. Shakspeare is the most famous of these, yet one perhaps equally great wrought there a work for the world fifteen centuries before he was born. The Stratford poet was ever a delver in old buried facts, which he overlaid with innumerable fancies, and you may find in his books a fanciful story of Cymbeline, or Cunobelin, real king of ancient Britain, and father of Caradoc. Caradoc is a hero of Warwickshire, although Shakspeare seems not to have heard of him. It is ever the world's loss that he did not, for his magic fingers would have woven a marvelous web from the strange tangled skein that has fallen to my clumsy hands. Yet here it lies, on this clear Christmas morning in Warwickshire, and though you find my handiwork labored, you may know 'tis a labor of love.

I

THE ALTAR UNDER THE OAK

King Caradoc came out with his warmen and his troop of Druidical priests to rebuild the stronghold of Warwick on a beautiful dawning of May. Warwick had been founded by "the radiant Cymbeline" in the truly radiant year when Christ was born, only to be ruined by Romans in the struggle about tribute-money, described by Shakspeare. Cymbeline, at last victorious, but moved by some strange whim of happiness to share his victory with the vanquished, had closed his warfare with the memorable words:

"Although the victor, we submit to Cæsar,
And to the Roman empire, promising
To pay our wonted tribute. . . .
Let
A Roman and a British ensign wave
Friendly together. So through Lud's town march:
And in the temple of great Jupiter
Our peace we'll ratify."

Caradoc had not been nurtured at the

court of the Cæsars after the fashion of the nobles of his time. His nourishment had been that of freedom. That island "outside the world," as the Romans called Britain—that "Neptune's Park," as Shakspeare quaintly names it; "ribbed and paled in with rocks unscalable and roaring waters"—had fed in Carodoc the love of liberty and scorn of tyranny and fealty to Fair Play which is Britain's chief title to glory.

The Crown Prince Adminius, his older brother, had on the other hand gone for his schooling to Rome. Just before Cymbeline died, Adminius returned from the Imperial City so much a Roman princeling and so little a British prince that the aged sovereign summoned his last strength to a deed of great wisdom and daring. In the presence of all the people he pronounced on Adminius the stern sentence, "A son of Rome is no son of mine," and with his own trembling hand set the crown of succession on Caradoc. The people gave tremendous acclamation, while Adminius, "suckling of the Roman wolf,"

stole back to his dam. As he went, he swore oaths of revenge. That was a twelvemonth ago.

No foreboding clouded the brightness of the young King's countenance as he came out through the forest to the rebuilding of Warwick on this beautiful dawning of May. That "perfect beauty and great strength" which early Britain demanded of her kings met in regal consummation in him. His lithe, erect figure, ruddy-crowned, was set off by true kingly trappings, revealing shrewd artifice among his jewelers, hosiers, and needlewomen. One who has ransacked the records of the musty age in which Caradoc lived describes him as wearing a furred mantle of sables oved his tunic of blue, which reached to his shapely knees. Tight hosen were bound with golden cross-garterings from the middle of the calf to the ankle, where they were met by black-pointed skin shoes. Around his neck swung a massive gold torque. At his side hung a long shining sword, Trifingus, alive with iridescent enamel. His ruddy locks were capped by

a headgear of gay striped cloth, mainly scarlet. To the peak clung the golden dragon of Britain—"the dragon of the Great Pendragonship." His eyes were blue and keen and fearless; his features clear cut, and his face clean shaven except for an auburn mustache growing well down on either side of a mouth at once gentle and firm, and betraying also that lurking sense of humour which is the unfailing accompaniment of both sympathy and hard common sense.

Caradoc, leading his ceremonious procession through the starlit aisles of the forest, was followed close by an escort of tangle-haired war-men, whose long and brightly checkered woollen cloaks—the primitive Highland plaids—were fastened with brooches of boar's tusks. Each man carried spear and battered shield, and all wore mantles of wolf-skin. Here and there a head-piece of horns or a mitered helmet of leather marked out an officer. Their bodies and souls were their King's.

Behind the warriors trooped the stately Druids, or Oak-Men: clad in clinging

robes of solid scarlet, with massy rough bands of hammered gold on wrist and ankle, and a long rough wooden staff in each right hand. Caradoc, scorning the temples of Rome, fostered this hoary cult of Druidism not because it attracted his devotion, but because it was rooted in the soil, and might be utilized for patriotic ends.

The somber disciples of Taranis and Camulus came chanting their Hymn to the Dawn in low monotonous wailings as the King led on the advance through and out of the forest to the summit of a gorse-sprinkled hill, beside the "soft-flowing Avon"—and, there suddenly pausing, struck his gigantic wolf-spear into the soil he had chosen for replanting the corner-stone of Warwick.

It was beneath the spreading branches of an oak that had been struck by lightning, and the Druids raised a shout of raptured joy. With them the high oak was held sacred as the stern and lonely monarch of the trees, speaking the voice of their gods.

Instantly the Arch Druid, old Dallan, rushed forward, peering upward through the pale green boughs, while his fellows pressed about him in silence, and the chieftains encircled the tree.

"Now all the tree-tops lay asleep
Like green waves on the sea,
As still as in the silent deep
The ocean-woods may be."

But suddenly, without any warning, and as though he never had risen before, the sun shot up above the vast unbroken forests to eastward, and kissed the budding oak upon the hill-top, so that there ran "a little noiseless noise among the leaves" as they trembled at the touch of his rays.

On the instant the eager-eyed Arch Druid, thrusting both clenched hands upward in highly wrought religious excitement, uttered a tense prolonged shriek—

"Oo-*yee!* The Mistletoe, All-Heal!* Oo-*yee!*"

As the sunrise lit up the great tree, the searching eyes of Dallan the Arch Druid

*The Druid word for mistletoe meant "All-Heal."

had discerned a branch of the mystical mistletoe growing close in against its huge trunk; little witting that the shrewd King had found it before him, and had carefully chosen his hour. To such fanatical religionists this union of omens seemed so propitious that there was not a man of them but shivered to his marrow with the rapture of superstitious awe—the stricken oak, the dawn, the mistletoe in the sixth day of the moon, the King and his cornerstone!—and the cry that shrilled from their throats as they stood with uplifted clenched hands behind Dallan frightened many a squirrel from his feast of tender twigs among the tree-tops.

When the cry had died down from want of breath, but before its echoes faded in the forest, the hook-nosed snow-bearded Dallan, beating himself twice upon the breast, raised his hands once more toward heaven and then shouted:

"Know ye, O people of Britain, that heaven smiles on you this day! The oak is the strong unswerving god. The gods love sacrifice, and have stricken this tree

in his heart; but the lightning is the touch of the gods, and the sacred mistletoe their thunder-besom. Sunrise is heaven's smile. It is the sacred sixth day of the moon. Here see ye the holy tokens, fixed in perfect unison at the moment of mighty adventure. By the sacred Anguineum which I bear upon my breast"—he wrenched it from its twisted chain of gold and held it aloft—"I declare that the favor of our gods is with King Caradoc, and that Caradoc shall mightily prevail!"

All the Druids chanted a loud and fervent "Amen," and the war-men clashed spear against shield; while Caradoc stood, proudly smiling, beneath the beneficent tree.

Dallan himself was an impressive figure, tall and tense, the sun striking fire from the curiously fashioned gold disc that formed his headgear, as well as from his golden shoulder-plates. He alone of all the Druids was clothed in white. He resumed his interrupted oration:

"Wherefore I call on you, O Druids, while the King with his chieftains marks

out the bounds of New Warwick, to get you to your duties, which ye know so well, and build here, where the King's spear stands, an altar for fit sacrifice on this Golden Day of the Dawn."

He lowered his gaunt arms, in token that his speech was now ended. Three priests pressed toward him for orders. These directions he whispered in their ears; then held against each heart, in turn, that mystical charm of the Serpents'-Egg, or Anguineum, which ancient chroniclers describe as of "about the size of a moderately large round apple, having a cartilaginous rind studded with cavities like those on the arms of a polypus." According to tradition it was aways produced from the saliva and frothy sweat of innumerable serpents writhing in an entangled mass in the moonlight, the egg being tossed up, as soon as formed, by their hissing. The divinely favored Druid who contrived, as it fell, to catch the egg-of-serpents in his sagum, or white linen apron, rode off at full speed upon horseback, pursued by the serpents until they

were checked by the passage of some clear running stream.

When Dallan had pressed the Anguineum against the breasts of the three priests in turn, they disappeared quickly in the forest: one, with a livid scar upon his face, which reached from temple to nostril, going in the direction of the village of wattled huts whence the procession had come, and the others toward a neighboring cattle-pit.

Meanwhile the remaining Druids, about two score in number, were hurrying to and fro in search of large stones, which they built in a surprisingly short time into a rough unplastered altar, between the oak and the sun.

This done, Dallan beckoned to the chief of the saronidæ, bardic instructors of youth. The winner of the circlet of gold in the last annual Tournament of Song stepped out and faced toward the sun, uplifting the British banner of scarlet in the same hand that held his rude harp, and chanted:

"O Thou strong King of Day,
Lord of Light,

Who chasest away
The dark night,
Thou hast smiled on the oak,
Thou hast bless'd Caradoc,
And we praise Thee with all of our might!

"O Wheel of the world,
Turning Wheel,
On our banner unfurl'd
Set Thy seal!
Give us true hearts of oak
For our liege Caradoc,
In the name of the sacred All-Heal!"

Gruff shouts of applause burst from the throats of the war-men as the chief bard brought his impromptu chant to its close; and the poet had no sooner returned to his place in the now silent and expectant band of Druids than the two priests who had gone to the cattle-pit were seen advancing from the rim of forest, leading two large white bulls.

Caradoc and his war-men moved out from under the tree to make way for the savage rites that followed. The bulls were fastened by their horns to the trunk of the oak. Dallan was then lifted on the

shoulders of the two assisting priests until he could clamber to a seat among the lowermost boughs. A golden sickle was handed up to him. With this, standing upright among the branches of the tree, he cropped the mistletoe, amid the pious chanting of the prests—catching the precious parasite in his snow-white sagum as it fell.

He then descended, with the aid of the two tall Druids, and placed the mistletoe upon the altar.

Returning to the tree, amid the perfect silence of the people he raised the knife of gold above his head, and, with two deft practiced strokes of his sinewy arm, severed the jugular veins of the bulls.

Their hot blood spouted gurgling on the tree-trunk; the Druids chanting a doleful "Amen" to this further good omen, the laving of the oak with warm blood. Both bulls fell without breaking their bands, one sharp horn piercing the tree until the sap oozed. There was a short convulsive struggle, and they were still.

The Druids uttered grunts of relief over

the fortunate killing. After Dallan had placed the sacrificial parts upon the altar, his followers pushed in for their edible share in the feast.

Caradoc and his war-men, knowing that the votive flame would not be lit on the corner-stone altar until the sun had quite touched his zenith—when the elaborate ceremony of dedication would take place —now set out on their journey to mark bounds for the walls of the town.

This engaged them for the space of several hours. Meanwhile the Druids built a fire, and presently partook of their barbecued beef "rather after the fashion of lions," although assisted by little bronze knives; gnawing the joints to the bone, and then tossing the denuded bones upon the embers.

Their feast ended, they stretched themselves around the barbecue fire to enjoy the sleepy pleasure of repletion, awaiting the hour of high noon. Their repose was soon interrupted by the return of the young scar-faced priest, bearing in his arms a crying child, whose piteous mother

dogged at Coran's heels. Youthful enough she appeared, despite her somber gown of hodden-gray, tied about the waist with thongs of straw—her hair covering her face like a veil, and half stifling her pitiful sobs.

The Druids gave scant heed to the girlish mother, but every man of them sat instantly attentive to the highest of all the Druid rites. Only on unusual occasions did the Oak-Men practice human sacrifice, but Dallan had decided that the extraordinary events of the morning demanded high mass to Taranis. He was all the more willing to make it since Myfanwy's beautiful boy had been used as occasion for scandal. Her husband having been slain in battle, her honor was thus left defenseless against the slanders of Coran the scar-faced.

Why should not this man-child be built as a stone of offense into the altar of the corner-stone, a sacrifice acceptable to the gods on two counts? Thus reasoned Dallan.

So the archpriest arose with great dig-

nity, and directed that due preparations should begin, after having craftily observed the disappearance of the King with his warriors far in the distance.

The two-year-old boy had been quieted by a big saffron pone which Myfanwy drew from her bosom and thrust into his outstretched hands. The girl-mother seemed utterly cowed as she crouched on the ground near the altar, transfixed with horror at what she saw through the veil of her tangled hair.

Coran placed the child inside his tomb. Dallan stood directing the mason, busily mixing his mortar.

When everything was finally ready, the mason scooped a slimy mass into his hands and began to smear it skilfully among the chinks with strokes of his bony forefinger. Little Dunwallo sat quietly within, munching his saffron cake in growing darkness.

Suddenly Myfanwy thrust forward on her knees, and, peering hungrily through a crevice of the altar, exclaimed in tones that were vibrant with the pain of

wounded love, and that framed themselves into the blind unconscious poetry of Celtic passion:

"I see his face, there gleaming like a rose!"

The mason's hands were busy at their task, shutting out the light from the altar. The smack of mortar against the stones made deeper darkness about the unsuspecting child.—

"I see his eyes, shining like twin stars!"

A rough hand seized Myfanwy by the shoulder, but she wrenched herself free and pressed her wet face against another part of the unfinished oven, while the mason's finger closed up the cranny that had just served as a window of love.—

"I see his hair, gleaming like the dawn!"

As they tore the girl-mother away and shut up the last poor channel of vision, she thrust her knotted hands above her head and, falling backward prone upon the ground, shrieked in heart-rending agony:

"I see nothing, nothing, nothing! Oh my child!"

Coran spurned the prostrate girl with

his foot, and harshly bade her be silent. Not knowing what she did, she seized him by the ankles, and began gnawing at his bones as if a dog. When they tore her free the shins of the slanderous priest were bleeding, and while they held her there, recumbent, she fixed her crazed glassy eyes upon him and poured out a torrent of curses.

"Thou dog of a Druid!" screamed Myfanwy. "Would thou wert with the dead fetid marsh-hag that bore thee! May scurvy rot thy bones and darkest demons snatch thy scowling soul! Thou it was that didst enter my hut with thy leer and thy lolling tongue! Hand of my husband it was that did brand thee across thy foul face, when he came in at eve from the hunt to find a wild beast in his home! Him didst thou betray in the battle! Me hast thou robbed of mine honour with the ulcerous sting of thy slander! And now thou hast taken my child!"

Her voice was stifled with the folds of her own coarse gown as they finally crushed her struggles and dragged her

back to the village. Coran, pointing ruefully down at his ankles, suggested that Myfanwy, too, should be immolated; but Dallan, who remained unruffled throughout this mêlée, waved the suggestion away with stately gesture and the curt pronouncement that so high a dedication must not be profaned or cheapened by the unholy blood of a female.

The sacred oven having now been completed, quantities of punk and dry wood from the hill-side were heaped about the entrails on top of the altar, as well as on the ground at its base; and, as the sun drew almost directly overhead, while Caradoc with his escort of warriors could be seen coming in from their circuit, the three assisting priests snatched brands from the barbecue fire, and awaited the word of command.

Old Dallan, his arms folded and his bushy gray brows gathered in a dignified frown, stood under the oak facing the altar, his Druids assembled around him ready to chant with their bards the solemn incantation to Taranis and Camulus when

the flames should mount toward the sky. The men who had dragged Myfanwy back to her empty hut in the village came running, quite out of breath, in time to join themselves to the Druidical company —followed to the edge of the forest by a motley crowd of villagers, who stood peering timidly and in open-mouthed wonder at the mystic ceremonial on the hill-top.

Caradoc, with an ill-suppressed yawn, leaned on his spear among the war-men, facing the Arch Druid and the altar. Dallan cut his keen eye toward the sun, then lifted his hand as a signal for the chant to commence.

It droned like the low drowsy murmur of bees as the Druids caught up the weird strain:

"O Taranis, oak-hearted Deity,
Taranis, blood-loving Lord!"—

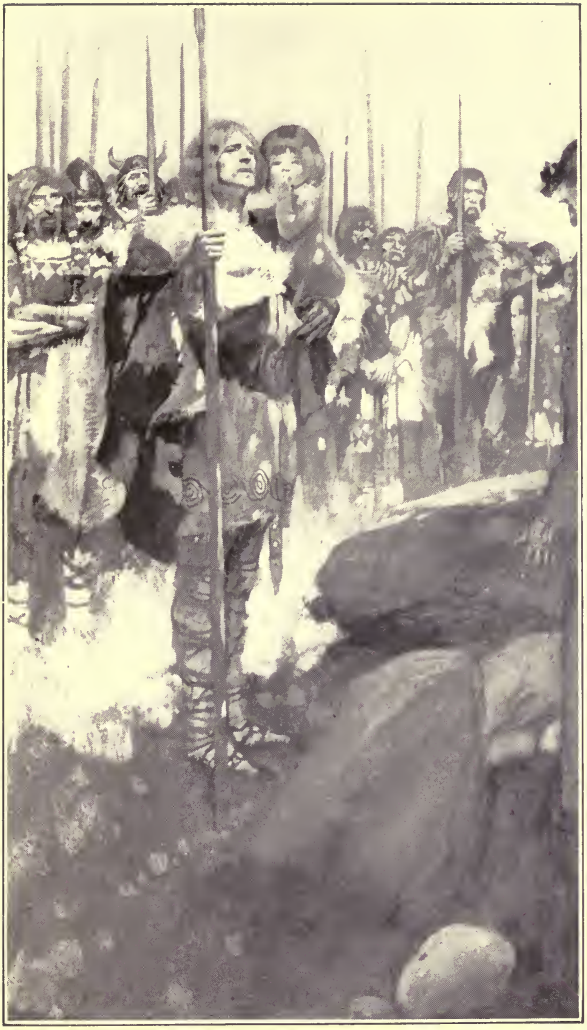
swelling to articulate sound as the priests rushed in with flaming torches and thrust them among the fagots.

Dry twigs crackled as the fire caught them. The chant dropped again to a

drone, before the wild hurricane of sound that should ascend with the uplifting flames.

A tiny ember sifted in through the lid of the oven and fell upon the baby's naked shoulder just as his drowsy eyes were yielding to the spell of close darkness and the feast of the great yellow pone. So it was that the shrill cry of a child pierced the low monotone of the bards precisely as the flames roared heavenward and the chant soared into a scream.

The quick ear of Caradoc detected this shrill note of keen childish agony, cutting the air like a knife. Unbidden, there flashed through his brain a swift vision of his own darling child, the Princess Imogen, safe with Queen Eigen at Colchester. His eye swept the freshly plastered oven of human sacrifice. It was clear that his well known horror of Druidic high mass had almost been baffled—on this day of all days—by Dallan's crafty fanaticism. Like a catapult he flung himself toward the altar, his sabled robe and scarlet cap slipping from him; and lay fiercely about



"Keep thou to thy oaks and thy mistletoe."
From a drawing by Frank Craig

him with his Homeric wolf-spear, showering the sparks and glowing coals in such fashion that the dumfounded Druids shrank back under the oak.

In a twinkling he had overtoppled the altar, with its burden of scorched odorous sacrifice. In a moment he had seized the small Dunwallo and lifted him high in his arms.

Turning then with blazing eyes toward old Dallan, he read that hook-nosed fanatic a lesson in royal rebuke such as made him blench before the face of his Druids, the war-men looking stolidly on.

"Thou treacherous priest!" shouted Caradoc, his right hand burning with pain,—

"Keep thou to thy oaks and thy mistletoe, but know that human sacrifice shall never stain the stones of New Warwick, nor imbrue the fame of my reign! On peril of thy life shalt thou venture ever to attempt the like again! I swear it by the Great Pendragonship!"

Dallan had recovered his composure. There was real majesty in the old fanatic's

bearing as he spoke for his outraged gods:

"And know thou, O Caradoc, that the gods will be avenged this very day! I swear it by the sacred Egg-of-the-Serpents!"

The King was walking indifferently over toward his war-men, all his youthful grace and supple strength disclosed with the loss of his trappings. The half-naked and quite dirty Dunwallo nuzzled his sunny head upon his shoulder and gurgled with laughter. The King smiled and kissed his chubby cheek. As if in answer to the Arch Druid's imprecation, a horseman crashed through the underbrush and flung himself to his knees before the King:

"The Romans are upon us, O my Master! They have crossed the Street-ford of the Avon! Adminius, thy brother, leads the way!"

....That "doomsday," as it afterward came to be called, closed the chapter of Caradoc's reign. "The Battle of Caradoc's Oak" was not a battle at all, but a shambles. Dallan, maddened that the grim wolves of Rome should appear as the

agents of his curse, fought like an aged sheep at bay. He fell among the stones of his altar, brandishing his sickle of gold. Scar-faced Coran wrenched it from his grasp, and with it killed the traitorous Adminius. The leader of the bards was struck down, wielding his harp as a weapon. Coran managed to make his escape, together with a group of fellow Druids. The larger group lay huddled near the oak. Caradoc, with but a tithe of his war-men surviving, fled eastward toward Colchester, then known as Camulodunum, the capital. Toward sunset the Romans pitched their camp on the hillside, and beside the soft river near by. As dusk fell, the commander Lucius, having bathed away the stains of battle in the Avon, strolled toward Caradoc's Oak. His attention had been attracted by sounds as of rude notes of music. He stumbled amid the overturned stones of the altar, and made out the prostrate figure of a blue-clad bard, whose dead hand clenched a broken harp. And beside him the living figure of a child! Dunwallo the

irrepressible, sunburnt and swarthy and covered with soot, had reappeared among the stones of sacrifice. Careless of the dead bard's hand, his baby fingers plucked the Celtic harp.

Lucius, a man compounded of craft, sternness, and whimsical kindness, stooped, smiling, to loosen the dead bard's hand. When he arose, he lifted up Dunwallo, still clinging to his harp of broken strings. Why should not a handful of Druids be spared to train this winsome little savage as a minstrel for the amusement of Rome?

CARADOC IN ROME

II

CARADOC IN ROME

When Caradoc and his war-men approached Colchester they found the British capital in the hands of the Romans. Claudius himself had crossed from Italy to lead his legionaries in their assault on this chief stronghold of the stubborn islanders, who, although nominally vassals of Rome for almost a century, had furnished no end of trouble. Queen Eigen and the infant Princess Imogen had been seized as captives, and the conquest of the whole island was planned. Stabbed to the quick by his personal losses, Caradoc's instant decision was for the utmost defense of his kingdom. Wheeling his black stallion westward again, he summoned the scattered British forces and led them to the mountains of Wales, whence for seven years he harried the invaders with a ruthless guerilla warfare. Overwhelmed in

the end and made captive through treachery, he found himself at last reunited with Eigen, whom Lucius had treated with complete respect. The twain of them were immediately transported to Italy, weighed down with a heavy load of grief. For Lucius, now governor of the palace at Colchester, kept the lovely little Princess Imogen in Britain. Why not so educate Imogen, reasoned Lucius, that in her person Britannia might some day wed Rome?

The prolonged resistance of Caradoc to the "ever victorious legions" had given him great fame in Rome. His arrival was therefore made the occasion of triumphal rejoicing. In glory of Claudius, now surnamed Britannicus, a pageant was marshaled with extraordinary pomp and splendour. "The land of the wintry pole" had at last become Rome's. All the temples were thrown open, garlands of flowers decorated every shrine and image, incense smoked on every altar. On the appointed day the procession of triumph defiled along the Via Sacra, for the enjoyment of

the multitudes and the especial glorification of the vain Claudius and his newly wedded Empress.

First came the Senate, headed by the magistrates and the victorious general, Ostorius, all riding in chariots of state. Following a body of picked trumpeters, a train of carriages rolled by, loaded with spoils; those articles that were deemed especially remarkable on account of their beauty or rarity being disposed in such a manner as to be seen distinctly by the throngs, who were shouting, *"Io Triumphe!"*

Then came troops of litter carriers, bearing aloft huge sign-boards whereon were painted in large letters the names of the vanquished British tribes. Borne on other litters were models in ivory and wood of the forts and cities captured during the seven-year struggle, together with pictures of the mountains, rivers, and other outstanding natural features of the subjugated region, with appropriate inscriptions. Gold and silver in coin and bullion, arms, weapons, cavalry trappings

of every description, vases, and other works of Celtic art, precious stones, elaborately wrought and richly embroidered stuffs, and every object that could be regarded as valuable or curious, were carried high upon litters and frames.

Preceded by a band of flute-players came now the white oxen destined for sacrifice, their horns gilded,—attended by the slaughtering priests with their implements, and followed by the Camilli bearing in their hands sacred vessels and instruments. Behind these oxen and their attendants swung the trained elephants that had rendered such effective service in overcoming the British resistance. Then appeared hordes of captives in fetters, terrified by multitudinous shouts of *"Væ Victis!"*—"Woe to the conquered!" Last of all marched Caradoc and Queen Eigen, clad in their lordliest garments, but humbled with chains.

The Queen, who still retained much of the maidenly beauty for which she was famous, was attired in a long crimson gown, above which was a tunic with flow-

ing sleeves. Fastened about her neck by a curiously wrought golden brooch was a mantle of blue, edged with gold, trailing almost to the ground. A hood half covered her clustering ringlet. Her gray eyes were so clear and fearless, her carriage so upright and free, that many women in the crowd whispered of her as "the lioness."

Marching at her side in a magnificent robe of ermine, intended as his shroud, Caradoc's native demeanor was such that in place of the bloodthirsty cries of *Væ Victis!* the populace actually began to shout his acclaim. "With a countenance still unaltered," reports the Roman chronicler himself, "not a symptom of fear appearing,—no sorrow, no condescension,—he behaved with dignity even in ruin."

On the Imperial tribunal Claudius sat enthroned: attired in the purple of a general, with oak-leaf crown and a scepter of ivory. Stiff with brocade at his side sat Agrippina—who was to murder him that she might enthrone Nero, her son; who in turn was to murder his mother—

and for the first time in Roman history the supreme insignia waved over the head of a woman.

Claudius and even Agrippina were impressed by the simple majesty of Caradoc, steeped though they were in that tradition recorded by Cicero, "It is the greatest pleasure in life to behold a brave enemy led to his torture and death." When Caradoc and Eigen came opposite the empurpled tribunal, Claudius intimated to the captive King that he might speak.

With majestic simplicity Caradoc combined deep sagacity. On the instant he framed a most skillful appeal to the enthroned couple to spare the lives of Eigen and himself as a memorial to the clemency of Rome:

"I had arms, men, and horses; I had wealth in abundance; can ye wonder I was unwilling to lose them? The ambition of Rome aspires to world-wide dominion: must mankind, in consequence, stretch out their necks to the yoke? For years I held you at bay: had I done otherwise, where had been the glory of your conquest, or

my honour in courageous resistance? I am at your mercy! If ye be bent on vengeance, strike!—the bloody scene will quickly pass, and the name of Caradoc sink to oblivion. On the other hand, by the preservation of life ye shall rear to late posterity a monument to the clemency of Rome!"

Amid the acclamations of the multitude the politic Claudius, after conferring with Agrippina, not only spared the lives of the British King and Queen, but—at the timid suggestion of Eigen—gave them permission to dwell outside the City gates, wherein they felt like caged eagles. They were accordingly lodged forthwith in the Prætorian Camp, where they lived in considerable comfort.

Here the Emperor and Empress, charioteering, occasionally observed the distinguished figure of Caradoc, and, summoning him to their side, conversed with him in good fellowship. Although a captive, Caradoc became one of the fashionable curiosities of Rome.

It was during one of these gateway

audiences that he received a peculiar mark of the Imperial favor. Claudius put into his hands one day a rescript, giving him permission to return to Britain under the safe-conduct of Rome, should he see fit at any time to renounce his claim to the throne. Caradoc smiled and shook his head as he received the rescript.

"Although I have no intent ever to set seal to this parchment," he said, respectfully, "I accept it, and shall cherish it always as a token of the Imperial kindness."

Twelve years passed by before he used it. He might never have done so at all had not the death of Queen Eigen, which utterly broke and unnerved him, been followed by the coming of the Sage.

Ten years the King and his Queen had lived together in a reasonably comfortable captivity, wherein they came to be all in all to each other. Soon after their arrival at Rome they had learned of the death, by the plague, of "the Princess Imogen." It was really the aunt of their own little Imogen that had died, the Imogen of

'A white-haired prisoner from Palestine"
From a painting by Rembrandt

whom Shakspeare writes. But the Roman officials did not undeceive them. Lucius himself had deliberately communicated the ambiguous news to the colonial office in Rome. His plans for the future of the infant Crown Princess involved the widening of the breach between parents and child in every way possible. Resigned, in the course of time, to the loss of their Imogen, the couple had only each other. It was therefore a stroke of the most poignant bereavement when the exiled King bade farewell forever to the devoted companion of his solitude.

In vain did he endeavor to solace himself with ill-remembered fragments of the Druidic doctrine of immortality. He had despised such teachings when he had no need of them, and now that he grasped at the straws of hope they whirled from his memory. Moody and contemplative, he was ripe for the visit of the Sage.

The Sage was a white-haired prisoner from Palestine, who, taking advantage of his rights as a Roman citizen, had appealed to the highest tribunal for trial.

After shipwreck and many discomfitures on the arduous journey, he came in under guard along the Appian Way at the close of a summer's day. The tired guardsmen gave him in custody for the night to the Captain of the Prætorian Camp, where Caradoc was quartered in loneliness. The Camp being crowded at the time, the Captain lodged his stately prisoner with Caradoc. There was that in the demeanour of the Sage that bespoke his own innate nobility, so that the courteous Roman officer lodged like with like.

Using the universal language of Rome, the two prisoners talked throughout the night. Never could Caradoc forget the mien of this marvelous man, nor his even more marvelous message. In vague poetic fashion the Druids had argued of life out of death from their magic symbol of the mistletoe, All-Heal, growing independent and lone from the trunks of the stricken oaks. In powerful contrast with such fantasies, Caradoc now listened to the crystal clear teaching of the Sage, who spoke as one having authority.

"One hath brought life and immortality *to light,*" said he.

The Sage entered the City on the following morning, and two years passed before these two met again. In all that time there was scarcely a day when the bereaved Caradoc, strangely comforted by the supreme confidence with which this Sage had spoken,—scarcely a day passed when he failed to repeat to himself the sonorous solemn music that had fallen from the lips of Paul of Tarsus,—

"As we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. For this corruption must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality."

It was in the Vale of Nemi that the two courtly prisoners met again, led to their meeting, unconsciously enough, by Poppœa Victrix. Her surname, The Victorious, was well deserved. Even Nero she had utterly vanquished; for her sake he had put his Empress away. This Emperor who was "at once a priest, an atheist, and a god," believed himself also to be a

poet. In meretricious verse that stirred the secret ridicule of literary Rome, he has at least embalmed for us those "amber tresses" in which he was entangled—the amber tresses of his friend Otho's wife, Poppœa, who kept five hundred she-asses to supply the milk in which she bathed, and who had her mules shod with gold when she traveled!

Honey Pot was incessantly greedy. Charioteering idly through the City gates, her beautiful roving eyes fell one day on the figure of Caradoc, and when she knew who he was, she desired him.

Stupid Nero had devised a perfect means to her end. In some strange mood of fantastic satire, or perchance in the crazy endeavour to conceal her real character, he had recently consecrated Poppœa as High Priestess of Diana, goddess of purity, whose chief shrine was in the gloomy Vale of Nemi. No sooner did this spurious Priestess spy the King from the oak-groves of Britain and yearn toward him, than the mischievous notion possessed her to anoint him as "Rex

Nemorensis," King of the Grove of Diana at Nemi, and alone privileged, from times immemorial, to consort with the Priestess herself. What mattered it that the anointment was by blood? The barbaric King from the wildwood looked doughty enough for ordeal by battle, and she resolved to give him secret aid if he deserved it.

A centurion came from Poppœa by night and spirited him away to the Vale of Nemi. So it was that in a dawn of silvered moonlight Caradoc found himself involved in the hoariest and weirdest rite of all antiquity.

This rite had to do with the mistletoe—named by Virgil "the Golden Bough" when he chose it as the supreme symbol of freedom. Most famous of all mistletoe shrines was Diana's Oak in the Grove of Nemi, whose guardian priest always owed his freedom from slavery to the Golden Bough, which he must thenceforward guard with his life. None but a slave could succeed to this uncanny priesthood, and he by plucking a spray of the Golden Bough from the heart of Diana's Oak.

To do this he must engage in mortal combat with the priest whom he would supplant—either slaying the priestly guardian, or himself being slain by him.

Deep in the shady sadness of the vale of Nemi gloomed Diana's Oak: described in an ancient Roman song as

> "The tree in whose dim shadow
> The ghastly priest doth reign;
> The priest who slew the slayer
> And shall himself be slain."

Under this Oak, night and day, walked Rex Nemorensis, the luckless Priest of Diana, guarding with sharpened sword the Golden Bough. "He kept peering warily about him as if at every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer; and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. Year in, year out, in summer and winter, in fair weather and in foul, he had to keep his lonely watch, and whenever he snatched a troubled slumber it was at the peril of his life. It is a somber picture,—the background of forest showing

black and jagged against a lowering sky, and in the foreground, pacing to and fro, a dark figure with a glitter of steel at the shoulders whenever the pale moon, riding clear of the cloud-rack, peers down at him through the matted boughs."

Such was the scene that met Caradoc as he stood on the bank near the Oak. He had no knowledge why he had been brought to this place. Poppœa he did not know except by hearsay, and he knew not that she knew him. Yet she was only a few yards away, concealed behind a laurel on the lakeshore,—quite alone, but with slaves within call. For her private enjoyment this insatiate lover of sensation had staged a gladiatorial surprise for the British war-man, as a prelude to her friendship, should he win.

The centurion snapped free the slender chain that bound his prisoner's wrist, and thrust Caradoc down the slope toward the Oak. Instantly a stealthy figure sprang out from the shade of the tree, and the moonlight flashed on a brandished blade. Instinctively Caradoc defended himself with bare hands as best he might. Then

there flooded through his veins the red tide of battle, racing riotously through channels long disused.

Erect and lithe as of old, rejoicing as a strong man in this swift return of his youth, he dashed the blade swirling through the moonlight, and felled the now defenseless priest with a blow.

He stood over him, startled by his unexpected adventure, mystified by the mystical scene. The prostrate priest made no sign. Before he could stoop to revive him, Caradoc heard a soft rustling, and turned.

"Thou hast conquered!" spoke a silver-throated voice.

He did not know who she was. She was beautiful, but he had no mind for her. His heart slept in the urn with Eigen.

"Hand me the sword," Poppœa commanded.

He stepped to the spot where it had fallen, out into the clearer light of dawn. Poppœa followed him. Unseen by Caradoc, two of her slaves, acting under instructions, slipped from the bank to the

shade of the Oak. They stooped above the body of the priest. Caradoc's blow had merely stunned him, but now a dirk flashed, swift and silent, and the slaves bore the body away.

Caradoc lifted up the sword, and handed it to Diana's Priestess.

"Now I shall give it back to thee," Poppœa murmured, "and with it thou winnest thy freedom."

"What meanest thou?

"Thou art King of the Grove," she said. "Take this sword and guard the sacred tree. No one shall ever molest thee. I, thy secret friend, will see to that. Take also this badge of thy freedom."

Caradoc took the sword from her hands in silent wonderment, with a spray of the Golden Bough. It was precisely as when Dallan the Arch Druid had handed him the sword "Trifingus" on the day of corronation at Colchester, together with a mistletoe bough, and had charged him to guard the sacred Oak. Why should the same rites exist here, in such wholly different surroundings? A shiver of superstitious awe passed through his frame.

"The dawn is chill," smiled the amber-tressed Poppœa. "The centurion kept me waiting while he brought thee,—but 'twas worth it to watch the whirling of that sword!"

Her laughter was the cadence of a song.

"What meanest thou?" he asked the second time. His brain was stupefied.

"That will I tell thee when once again Diana's moon shall swing above us. Now the dawn calls, and I must go. See, the slaves of the dead priest shall serve thee!"

Cardoc turned. Slaves stood near the tree with laden salvers. They approached, and began to spread a feast. When he faced once more toward Poppœa, she had gone....

He sat on the moss-covered bank far into the morning, pondering what had befallen. Meanwhile, Rome was enjoying a minor sensation. There were no newspapers in those days, but public bulletins took their place, and rumour was fleet then as now. With due official authority

it was promptly announced that Caradoc, captive King of Britain, had seized the prerogative of slaves and won freedom as King of the Grove. Poppœa had looked after that.

Paul of Tarsus heard the news from the officer of the guard, who had lately become his disciple. He had attracted many followers during the two years he had been privileged to live in his own hired house, and was known to be especially interested in the study of blood sacrifice. At the time, he was writing an important monograph on this subject, afterwards termed an epistle. He had long desired to visit the famed Oak of Diana, and investigate for himself its weird ritual. When he heard the name of Caradoc again, he recalled with stirring interest the night they had spent talking together in the Prætorian Camp. He resolved to go to see him if he could. With characteristic earnestness hard to be denied, he requested of the officer of the guard that he might on that very morning take advantage of a long-promised privilege

to journey outside the City gates. Before noon he and his Roman disciple were on their way to the Vale of Nemi.

Caradoc greeted his scholarly visitor with joy; he knew of no one in all the world he would have preferred to him. Paul, a man of impetuous directness, asked him immediately how he came there.

When Caradoc recounted the strange story of the preceding night, Paul became thoroughly alarmed for him. Poppœa Victrix was seeking out a new victim! He explained to Caradoc the terrible danger he was in: Nero's mistress had involved him in seeming intrigue. Caradoc gave but scant heed to this peril, so eager was he for the Sage to take up the broken thread of his narrative, interrupted two years before. As Paul now spoke of the Unknown God whom ignorantly both Druids and Romans worshiped, compressing his entire philosophy into the sentence, "*Love* is the fulfilling of the law," Caradoc's face shone as with an inner light. "He is the God not of the dead, but of the living," said Paul. "He came

that we might have life, that we might have life more abundantly." Then, as Paul sketched with masterful strokes and with a supremely confident faith the message of the Manger and the Cross, Caradoc caught the high contagion of his zeal. His eyes flashing, the King leaped to his feet.

Paul himself became greatly excited when Caradoc drew from his girdle the rescript of Claudius, and proclaimed his newly formed purpose.

"Blessed be Claudius!" cried Caradoc. "I will accept the Imperial safe-conduct, and go back straightway to Britain! I will freely renounce my own Kingdom to tell my people of this holy King of Love! There shall come a new world to all people: built on freedom instead of fear, on forgiveness instead of vengeance, on life, and not death!"

For once Diana's Grove was left unguarded, save by slaves, as Caradoc hastened wih Paul and the officer of the guard to the palace, to arrange for departure for Britain. As they traveled, Paul enthusi-

astically pointed out that under favourable weather conditions his new disciple might expect to reach Britain about the time of the winter solstice—celebrated as Christmas by the Christians, as Yule by the Norsemen and Druids, and by Romans with the Feast of Saturnalia.

When the spurious Diana returned to her Oak on the following night it fared ill with two hapless slaves. On them alone could she vent her displeasure, since intrigues involve secrecy.

NEPTUNE'S FEAST

III

NEPTUNE'S FEAST

Imogen, so far from being lost, as her father had long supposed, attained her majority during the summer preceding Caradoc's departure for home, the most beautiful woman in Britain. She strikingly resembled her mother, the Queen, as that noted beauty had looked in her girlhood, but with an added grace and delicacy of manner due to her life in the household of Lucius. She had the free upright carriage and fearless gray eyes of "Eigen the lioness," with her mother's charmingly modeled features. Ruddy-crowned like her father Caradoc, and sharing his singular power to attract, she was touched above all with a bloom that bespoke the rare culture of Rome. Lucius, although increasingly kind with the years, had never once relaxed his strong resolu-

tion to wed Britain, through Imogen, with Rome. Since babyhood this thought had been daily drilled into her mind. When she came of age in the summer of the year 62, he seemed about to see the crowning of his statecraft.

Britain had become a land of sharp contrasts, particularly at Colchester. There Lucius dwelt in marble halls; there also a temple had been consecrated in honor of Claudius, a statue of Victory set up in the well-paved streets, and a resplendent theater provided for the large colony of Romans. The British, on the other hand, endured unending poverty and oppression, ground by the heel of their conquerors. Their dwellings were rude log huts, wattled with reeds.

Imogen was the only bond of union between victors and vanquished. The Romans respected her and the British adored her. Nurtured in the lap of Roman luxury, she had nevertheless grown up as free as the birds of the air. There was not a British peasant girl who could match her swimming stroke, nor any Roman youth

in the colony who surpassed her in falconry or archery. The little remnant band of broken Druids, at length despairing of Caradoc's messianic return, pinned their last shred of hope to their Princess.

As for the young bard Dunwallo, he altogether owed her his life, properly forfeit to the gods since that terrible doomsday—as the five remaining Druids now always called it—when the young King had snatched him from the flames. In his rôle as harper to Lucius, Dunwallo had been the one unfailing means of communication between the Druids and their Princess, and therefore his life had been spared by them, in spite of old Coran's fanaticism.

These were the conditions existing when the long expected wedding of Imogen received its spectacular setting. Lucius planned as the last act of his governorship her marriage with Gallus, the youthful commander whom Nero had named to succeed him at his own request.

To make this wedding gorgeously symbolical, Neptune's Feast Day—July 23—

of the year 62 A. D. had been chosen, and the event itself was to be preceded by a brilliant marine pageant at the mouth of the river Colne, twelve miles from the capital.

On her wedding eve "the radiant Imogen," as she was now universally called, flitted here and there through the palace, a-glitter with lights,—making merry with her army of tirewomen and caterers, but unwontedly restless at heart. The great awakening had never really come to her; she did not know what love was; so now, instinctively, her girlish fancies stirred in blind revolt. The marriage had seemed light enough as Father Lucius arranged it, so long as it lay in the future; but now that to-morrow was to be the last day of her maidenhood, her spirts were turbulent within her, she knew not why. Like a wood-nymph, her abundant ruddy tresses flowing free, she ran tip-toe from room to room, followed by the smiles of her slave-women. Airy, fairy Imogen, they called her. Never had her smile seemed so winsome, never her glance so

kind; but the light in her eye was as the eaglet's and the rebellion in her breast she could not quell.

Darting like a humming-bird from room to room, at length she flung wide the doors that led to an outer balcony, and stood in the white magic moonlight, breathing the midsummer air. There was turmoil in the court-yard below her, for the whole palace was astir with preparation. Suddenly she made out Dunwallo —distinguishable among the crowd of shock-haired British youths in the moonlit court-yard by the Celtic harp he bore upon his arm.

On the instant she clutched at her heart. Swift through her brain flashed the knowledge that her lot as a Roman matron would fence her off forever from her comrade. With no thought of restraining the impulse, she leaned out over the balcony and called his name.

He looked up and saw her, the moonlight streaming on her face. She was his Princess, and he worshiped her with a feeling like awe; but the caste that separ-

ated them had not interfered with the wholesome outdoor comradeship of boy and girl. He had often sung to Lucius in the gardens, as David used to sing to King Saul; Imogen nestling against her gray-haired guardian's side, drinking Celtic folk-lore from the harp-strings. Not only so, but they had roamed field and wildwood together, and raced through the turbulent surf. Once, in their earlier youth, when Myfanwy came through the forests from Warwick to visit her minstrel son at the capital, the two children had begged over and over again for the wonderful story of Caradoc's Oak, still standing at Warwick, although now dead to the heart. This tale formed a strong bond between them. Many times they had sat at the mouth of the traditional "Caradoc's Cave," under the cliff by the river, where Myfanwy first taught them the story, and told it each to the other by turn.

Dunwallo looked up and saw her. Her white face, straining toward him in the moonlight, smote like a blow upon his heart. He thrilled to that in her tone he

had never heard in any voice before. He answered her with a rich chord of music, but he knew not what had befallen.

The scene lasted only an instant. Gallus, his scented curls crowned with the grape leaves and his dark face flushed with their wine, strode into the balcony behind Imogen and crushed her shoulder in a grasp domineering and sensual.

"What would'st thou, calling to a servant in the courtyard?"

His rasping words hurt more than his grasp. Other gilded Roman youths had toasted him all too hilariously at his prenuptial banqueting. Imogen shrank back and eluded him. Crimson with her first sense of shame, quickened with her first sense of terror, her shoulder burning where his hot hand had clutched her, she fled to her rooms. The wedding dress was lying on a couch. She fingered it, nervously, and half against her will, with deep repulsion. It felt rough to her touch, and a needle left carelessly in the hem pricked her tender hand and drew blood. The sight appalled her; she was not without the

superstitions of her time. More restless than ever, the smile gone from her lips, she flitted out again into the halls, so white and cold. She came suddenly on gray-haired Lucius at a turning. His smile was very gentle as he took her in his arms and kissed her forehead; he was troubled to see tears well from her eyes as she slipped from him. She was choking with a surge of new emotions. Scarcely knowing what she was doing, she glided down the gleaming stairs out into the scented gardens where fountains played. But she was craving for Nature herself, wild and beautiful and wise. Through the narrow postern gate she made her way, fleet-footed, down the cliff and through the buttercups of the meadows, to the group of friendly little fir-trees near the entrance to Caradoc's Cave. There, where she had often sat with Dunwallo,—there, where Myfanwy had enchanted her round-eyed childhood with the tale of her exiled father, she sat down on the moss-covered stone which, as legend had it, had closed the hoary doorway of the cavern until the boy Caradoc cleared it away.

She had no thought of what had happened to Dunwallo, no thought of what had happened to herself. He, poor bard, had of a sudden become himself a harp, played on with sweet tumultuous music. In a fever of restlessnes that he could not understand, he, too, had been roaming the moonlit night. Beautiful as Endymion whom Diana loved, but filled with brooding melancholy by the curse resting always upon him, the young bardic Hamlet to-night sought his lonely refuge in Caradoc's Cave. A while before Imogen had half unconsciously found her way to the mossy stone under the fir-trees, Dunwallo had flung out of the court-yard and over the cliff to his cavern. He knelt now in its inmost recesses, gazing into the heart of a little fire.

Imogen had no thought of his nearness as she sat in a halo of moonlight, her hands clasped, her breast heaving, facing the great awakening, as yet unguessed.

Visions flitted through Dunwallo's flickering firelight, visions he had often seen before. They were always visions of

Imogen. There was a soft vision of babyhood, seen through the eyes of Myfanwy: a cruel priest, a saffron pone, a great godlike man seizing him from darkness and pain, a mighty tumult, and then a Roman holding him up on his arm. Always, for some unexplained reason, the Roman, whom he knew to be Lucius, held Imogen upon the other arm. Then there was a day in the forest when with all his boyish strength and cunning he saved her from the jaws of the she-wolf they had together cheated of her cub. There was another day when he lay bleeding and senseless at the foot of the waterfall whose side he had scaled for a splendid flower for Imogen; and when he opened his eyes it was Imogen whose brown hands had revived him with water from the brook. There were races through the surf and the sea, and there was the rescue of the poor screaming hare from the talons of the falcon, when Imogen had wept like a girl—for tears had been strange in the eyes of this beautiful tomboy. Then there were those innumerable golden moments in the

scented gardens, Imogen nestling against the shadowed figure of Lucius, she herself as bright and clear as gold, while Dunwallo sang his wild Celtic music to the tunes of his sweet Celtic harp. Dreamily he took it up now, a mysterious new tumult within him, its meaning as yet unguessed. "Rose of the World," was the song that he sang; and Imogen, out in the moonlight, caught the weird strains from the cave, and lifted up her head in dreamy wonder.

"Once upon a morn of May
All the meadowlands were gay,
All the tree of life was dight
With the blossoms of delight.

"'Lo!' I said unto my spirit,
'Earth and sky thou dost inherit!'
Forth I wandered, free of care,
In the largesse of the air.

"By there came a damosel;
At a look I loved her well:
But she passed and would not stay—
All my joy is gone away!

"Now no fields are fair to see,
Nor the buds on any tree;

Nor care I for earth or sky—
All for a maiden's passing by!"

While he chanted the last cadence of the song, Dunwallo's brain was lit as by a flash of lightning, which illumined his whole being, and also warmed him like wine. From the little fire he marched out into the white magic light of the moon, his forehead uplifted and shining, his eyes indeed "like twin stars." His face was set with a resolution both inflexible and tender. Imogen beheld a young god.

They were not Princess and serf any longer, nor did any curse seem to rest on Endymion. Diana uttered a small muffled cry. Dunwallo marched straight toward his goddess. He knelt at her feet beside Caradoc's Stone, and the spirit of the great Nursing-Father of Britain brooded over his children. Imogen stooped, and her cheek touched Dunwallo's dark hair, her own wealth of unbanded tresses shining in the moonlight like spun gold. Then the two heard that music from the hidden inner shrine of life itself which mortals are thrice happy if

they hear but once, and which it is given to no mortal ear to hear a second time this side of heaven.

"Love took up the Harp of Life, and smote on all
the chords with might,
Smote the chord of self that, trembling,
past in music out of sight.". . .

The light of resolution in Dunwallo's face did not melt under the spell of his love. For the once he was freed from all moodiness. He raised his head and looked with deep eyes into Imogen's, dreamy with wonder.

"Thou takest *me,* O radiant Imogen, in place of Gallus?"

His clear tones vibrated with an excited sense of repressed action; they rang as with a touch of tempered steel, and quickened Imogen out of her reverie. She shuddered at the mention of Gallus, and leaped to her feet.

Dunwallo sprang up beside her. Tensely holding each other's hands, they planned swiftly a means of escape—their young brains on their mettle, and racing. They would flee during Nep-

tune's Feast! They both knew enough of the programme planned for the next afternoon to understand that Imogen herself, representing Britannia, was to march out through the shallows of the cove and pay tribute to Gallus, as Neptune, on his watery throne. It was Dunwallo's eager suggestion that Imogen, this done, should make some playful excuse to leap from the throne-rocks into the sea, where she was quite as much at home as on land. He, meanwhile, would be waiting behind the sharp southern headland, which jutted out and hugged the cove like an arm. The five Druids must be taken into confidence! With their aid Imogen should journey by forest and river to Warwick, and the hut where Myfanwy still lived.

Before Imogen stole back through the postern gate, the plans of the two forest-lovers had been woven, and laid on the lap of the gods. The sea-god Neptune must have resented the audacity of his drunken impersonator, next day, for the blundersome Gallus himself became the fool in a farcical comedy, and tool to these lovers' desire.

At this time the sandy cove at the mouth of the river Colne, only twelve miles from the capital, furnished a perfect marine stage for Neptune's festival. It was protected by headlands on either side, and a rocky islet near the center of the cove offered itself as a pedestal for the sea-god's throne.

The entire Roman colony turned out hilariously to see Britain become indeed "Neptune's park," through this allegorical wedding of the Princess Imogen with Gallus. The strand was lined with booths built of freshly cut boughs, and covered with masses of oak-leaves, affording a grateful protection from the heat of the afternoon sun. In these booths the colonists, old and young, were feasting and drinking at the expense of the generous Lucius, who, with special guests from the palace, occupied the booth in the center.

Scattered shouts of applause greeted the first sign of the approaching ceremonial, as Portunus, guardian of harbours, strode out from the beach toward Neptune's throne. Gaffer Leir, the oldest

British inhabitant of the country, had been pressed into service for this part. A hulking giant of a man, still straight despite his eighty years, he drew applause for his own majestic bearing as he waded out through the shallows—a mantle of British scarlet cast loosely about his broad shoulders, his white beard tossed by the wind, and in his hands the gigantic key he was to present to Neptune in token of a welcome even from the British.

Following Portunus, and gaily chiding him now and then for the majestic slowness of his gait, were two tall Roman girls cast for the parts of Ino and Thalassa, to stand as handmaids on either side of Neptune's throne. Representing as they did the powers of the sea, they wore garments of billowing green, bound about them with festoons of small shells. Their hair flowed free except for fillets of shining sea-weed.

Scarcely had old Portunus reached his place at the foot of the throne of British oak,—upborne by gilded figures of dolphins,—Thalassa and Ino standing near

and waving merrily to their roistering friends on the strand,—when the dazzling apparition of Neptune's car burst into view from behind the northern headland.

It was fashioned as an immense sea-shell, being actually covered with a complete layer of mother-of-pearl, which flashed all the tints of the rainbow in the low light of the afternoon sun. The axle and pole were of gold, and the whirling spokes were of silver. The rim of the car was encrusted with huge opalescent gems. Four milk-white stallions with Argus wings and brazen hoofs and gilded manes drew the car at a gallop through the ebbed sea, giving an almost perfect illusion of skimming the waves, under the practiced rein-hand of Gallus.

He himself stood somewhat uncertainly in his whirling car of light, for which a sandy road under the water had been carefully freed from chance stones and pitfalls. Gamboling around him were the hundred Nereids, impersonated by British maidens under the lead of Galatea and Thetis, whose parts were taken by two Roman ladies from the palace.

In their eagerness the throngs on the beach left their booths, and stood unconsciously laving their feet in the lazy surf, shouting vociferous applause for this gorgeous spectacle, which exceeded in splendour anything they had seen since leaving Rome.

Neptune reached the central reef without mishap. The four shock-haired British grooms who, habited as Tritons, had raced through the sea beside the four stallions, now seized them by the bit and held them as steady as possible while Neptune dismounted; then the grooms led the bright chariot shoreward, where it became the center of sight-seeing swarms. When the sun would have set, Gallus and his bride were to be borne ashore in the arms of their worshipful attendants, and then drive merrily homeward in their "car of light" over a specially prepared roadway to the evening ceremonial at the palace.

All was now in readiness for the tribute-bearers. Portunus, with reluctant hospitality, had presented the Roman claimant with his key. Neptune, holding his great

jeweled trident aloft, was seated on the oaken throne, at the foot of which Portunus knelt in symbolic submission. Over the sea-god's head Thalassa and Ino held rustling fronds of sea-palm. All around the rocky islet sat the resting Nereids, their locks tossing in the gathering evening breeze.

Through passage-ways left clear on either side of the central booth of Lucius, the British tribute-bearers now defiled. There were an even hundred of them, corresponding to the number of the Nereids: fifty each of British boys and girls, the boys bearing grain and fruits, and the girls being laden with flowers. There were gillyflowers of all varieties; musk-roses, and the blossoms of the lime-tree; honeysuckle, columbine, and marigold. Besides staple grains, the boys bore such fruits as pears and apricots and barberries, with musk-melons, ginitings, and quadlins There were also plums of several sorts, and baskets distended with filberts. The air was fraught with a fragrance compounded of manifold sweets as the hun-

dred tribute-bearers waded out to the vine-crowned Neptune and heaped this garnered bounty at his feet.

Applause from the jubilant spectators swelled to its loudest compass when Britannia herself appeared in the train of her hundred heralds. Erect as a young oak, her brow garlanded with oak-leaves, her shining tresses falling to her supple waist, and her beautiful face all aglow with a new radiance well befitting this nuptial occasion, Imogen elicited the zenith of acclaim as her adoring heralds parted and made way for her to ascend from the sea over a carpet of flowers to the throne of her liege lord and master. This exquisite white-clad beauty suggested Amphitrite herself as she arose from the waters and faced Neptune.

The suggestion was not lost upon Gallus. Half intoxicated as he was, it so entranced him that he forgot his part and wholly became his worst self. Amphitrite should marry Neptune here and now! He seized Imogen passionately, while the throngs yelled louder from the shore. The

struggle was but momentary. Lithe Britannia slipped from Neptune's drunken grasp, leaped from the seaward side of the reef, and swam rapidly northward. Gallus reeled, too drunk to follow, and the shouts from the shors became jeers.

Farther seaward, farther northward, swam Imogen. Billows engulfed her, but the Romans on the strand had no fear. They knew her for the sea-nymph she was. All of them were laughing uproariously. "What a joke on Captain Gallus, forsooth!"

He cut a ridiculous figure now, silhouetted against the clear sky, as he kneeled a trifle groggily on the seat of his throne, peering seaward under an unsteady hand; his thronewomen and Nereids agape, while old Portunus dared to smile openly.

Farther northward, farther seaward, swam Imogen. The waves, with the now flowing tide, mounted high as she left the sheltered cove. She disappeared entirely from view. Lucius, angered by the

unseemly behaviour of Gallus, at length became thoroughly alarmed. He broke up the pageant abruptly, amid tremendous hubbub. Search parties were sent out for the swimmer, ashore and in the sea. No trace of her could be found.

Night drew nigh. Stirred to the sternest depths of his wrath, Lucius loaded Gallus with chains, and held him against the ransom of Imogen. . . . A week, a month, passed by. The Princess was given up for lost, and Gallus sent back to Rome a prisoner, with reports to his Imperial master of conduct unbecoming a nobleman and officer.

Imogen made her escape with Dunwallo. When the towering billows hid her from Neptune's throne, she veered southward. Dunwallo met her far out at sea, his black head bobbing up and down. By and by her long ruddy locks streamed beside him like a watery comet. In sheer joy they shouted to the sea-gulls screaming above them, and the free British sky overhead. Then "they swam silently, high, low, creatures of the smooth green roller. He heard the water-song of her

swimming." Hand lightly touching hand now and then, they sped southward; without haste, without rest, and unwearied. They swam in an ocean of love. At last—far too soon it seemed to both of them—the heads of the five crouching Druids appeared above the lower rocks of the headland, and Princess and peasant waded to the shore hand in hand, through the dusk.

Aged Coran the Scar-faced wrapped a rough woollen cloak about Imogen, and in her behalf exorcised the forest demons. In the presence of these somber Druids, Imogen and Dunwallo alike felt darkness steal into their hearts. Dunwallo, ever a creature of moods, descended from heights to the very depths. As he reverently bade Imogen farewell, a cold dread took hold upon him, while the old priest watched them askance. Through fen and moor, by waterway and gloomy forest paths, encamped by day and traveling only at night, the five Druids conveyed their royal charge to Myfanwy's humble welcoming near Warwick,—while Dunwallo mingled gloomily enough with other servitors in the palace court-yard at Colchester.

SATURNALIA AND YULETIDE

IV

SATURNALIA AND YULETIDE

Saturnalia at last drawing nigh, Dunwallo made ready as usual to spend the week at Warwick. During the festival sacred to slaves, Lucius had always allowed his harper this boon. Heavy-hearted, he took up his journey; he did not expect to see Imogen. Druid as he was by life-long association and training, and imbued with the dogma of his curse, the loneliness of life at the palace,—bereft for the first time of Imogen,—had induced such a mood of depression that he deemed himself a sacrilegious criminal. The blackest melancholy that this young bardic Hamlet had ever known succeeded the momentary dazzlement of love. His Princess—how had he ever dared love her? One thought alone brought him comfort: through his aid she had escaped drunken Gallus. On

the other hand, had she not lost the loving luxuries of Lucius, did she not drink the bitter dregs of poverty? His superstitions caused him to fear that by the curses resting on himself he may have brought curses on her. Who knew but old Coran was right? How could the gods bestow favours so long as they were cheated of their due?

With such thoughts grinding in his brain, Dunwallo trudged through the forest paths to Warwick, not aglow with the glory of the lover, but oppressed with the curses of the doomed. No doubt the ghastly sickliness of that long remembered winter fed the fevered vapours of his mind.

Saturnalia spelt respite from serfdom. Reminiscent of the vanished age of Saturn and prophetic of a golden age to come, this gay carnival softened for a week of every twelvemonth the arrogant lordiness of Rome. In the Imperial City itself, where freedmen were accustomed to dedicate their cast-off manacles to Saturn as divine author of liberty, all fetters were

removed from his statues, so that no sign of slavery should appear. Thus for one brief week the masters of all the world played make-believe of universal liberty, roistering at their feasts with unbound slaves. Even the stern rulers of colonies turned the tables of customary behaviour, seating the slaves at festal boards and rollicking as servitors themselves—the formal toga replaced by the loose synthesis, after which the domino of modern carnivals is patterned, and the close-fitting cap, then called pilleus, now known as the liberty-cap, crowning every head as a symbol of universal manumission. At this high carnival of the winter solstice—lasting from the seventeenth to the twenty-fourth of December inclusive—tiny wax tapers were everywhere exchanged as lightsome gifts, with dolls made of pastry and clay. Everywhere also the wintry air resounded with the merry-making shout, *"Io Saturnalia!"*

By the time Dunwallo reached Warwick, half-starved in that famine-cursed winter, his gloomy thoughts had become

an obsession. More than once it came into his mind that he should heed the veiled dogmas of Coran, and avert further woes from his people—especially from the radiant Princess Imogen—by propitiating the cheated Taranis. That meant his death. He avoided Myfanwy and Imogen, with whom it would have fared ill that winter but for the constant aid of the five Druids. The two women were not only provided with food, but the medicinal skill of old Coran warded off the menace of the plague. By these devoted guardians, moreover, the presence of the Princess in Warwickshire was jealously concealed. Not a soul knew of it but themselves, with Dunwallo and the white-haired Myfanwy.

On reaching Warwick toward the end of Saturnalia week, Dunwallo had companioned with the Druids. Morose and silent, they barely greeted him, and said not a word of their charges. From their stealthy visits to his mother's hut, loaded with the food for which they foraged, he guessed that his mother and Imogen were alive and well.

SATURNALIA AND YULETIDE

It was Yuletide eve. The Druids were encamped for their rites under the Tree of Caradoc, where, licensed by Saturnalia freedom, they sat around a glowing log of oak.

The forest had been cleared between this hill-top and the ancient British village, and now a strong Roman settlement marked the site of the Warwick of later days. The Romans, always keen judges of locality, had endorsed the judgment of Caradoc, and posterity continues to praise it.

"Under this hill, hard by the river Avon," as one quaint chronicler has phrased it, "is the very seate itselfe of pleasantnesse. There have yee a shady little wood, cleere and cristall springs, mossy bottomes and caves, meadowes alwaies fresh and greene, the river rumbling here and there among the stones, with his stream making a milde noise and gentle whispering, and besides all this, solitary and still quietnesse, things most grateful to the Muses."

The muse of William Shakspeare was

surely partial to his native Warwickshire,

> "With shadowy forests and with champains rich'd,
> With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads."

The Romans of Caradoc's time have been charged with decadent taste in many points, but Warwick must be cited in their favour....

On this last night of Saturnalia week, as Yule day drew toward its dawn, Dunwallo sat with his five Druid companions, beneath the stark branches of Caradoc's Oak, attendant on the coming of the sun. His harp gleamed in the Yule-log glow. He plucked moodily at its strings in preparation for that weird Hymn to the Dawn in which it was now become his lot to lead the Druids.

When men's nerves are strained to the breaking-point, even a twanging harp may make them snap.

"Curses on thee!" suddenly muttered Coran. "Cease the idle twanging of that harp! The gods must not be waked before the dawning! Curses, double curses, come upon thee!"

"Peace, Coran," softly answered the startled Dunwallo. "Curses come home to roost, the saying goes, and our curse is heavy already."

The scar-faced priest sat rigidly upright as though he had springs in his backbone. His pale eyes flashed with life once more, and the seam on his face seemed to deepen. The fanatical devil dwelling in his breast shook his voice to a cataract of utterance.

"Ay, well thou hast said, thou Dunwallo, that curses come back home to roost! Well hast thou said that our curses are heavy to bear! To come from thy lips of all men! Came not our curse out of thee?"

This question he screamed with such shrillness that Dunwallo looked alarmedly about; and then, smiling sadly, replied:

"Softly, softly, testy Coran, or the Romans may bring us Yuletide with a vengeance!"

"Yuletide, indeed!" shouted Coran, the four others listening intently to what gave promise of becoming a broil.

"Ay, the Yule!" cried the bitter old

priest of former days, with strident intensity of passion, leaning forward with skinny elbows on his knees, his eyes now glowing like coals:

"Knowest thou not 'tis the hour of the Yule Wheel?—that the angered Wheel-God of heaven is turning him now in his courses?—and, if he be not appeased in his wrath, he will burn us to hell with his curses? This week the Sun wheels in his circuit; woe be to us if we spit toward the Yule!"

The four companions sat with their chins in their palms, weary and worn with sore toil, despondent from oppression and from exposure in this strangest of all British winters, but listening with eager intentness to the spokesman of altarless gods.

"Who would spit toward the Yule, Father Coran?"

The old man held back his reply; peering deep into the youth's melancholy but entirely fearless eyes, his face twitching with unearthly excitement, his scar throbbing like something alive.

When the answer was finally moulded,

it fell slow from his thin writhing lips, each word with a sting as of an asp, impelled by the malignant ferocity which religious bigotry draws to its prime.

"Accursed of the gods!" he hissed. "Spawn of leprous sire and lying dam! Robber of the altar, cheater of the sacrifice, it is thou that spittest at the Yule! Seest thou not that thy living is a daily insult to deity? Knowest thou not that thy life's blood is forfeit to hungry Taranis? Well do I remember that damnable May day noontide, when Dallan called vengeance from the skies! The smell of sacrificial fire still clung to thy swaddling-band when the courier fell from his frothy horse and proclaimed, like some herald from hell, the coming of Jupiter's scourge! The beak of the eagles of Rome hath rended the hearts of our people because all the Druid gods of heaven wreak revenge for the cheating of Taranis! Thy hag mother frothed in her frenzy and left me these anklets for keepsake, as thy father had marked me this scar! I spare her life now and feed her because she

shelters our Princess! Thine own life was forfeit, I tell thee; the mad King raped it from the Oak-God's jaws! In exchange for thy puling infant's drachm of blood, the blood of our oak-hearted manhood has deluged Britain with red floods of fury even from that day to this! War, war, war! Toil and pain, toil and pain, toil and trouble! Bloody curses, stinking woes, and filthy serfdom—that hast thou brought to our bosoms! Thou art the hell-born incubus of Britain, the father of fiendish woes! Even the clouds and the seasons retch at thee! Why this reeking moisture of midwinter? Why these steaming months of lukewarm fog? Why this baleful threat of deadly plague? Why do the worms rot the trees, and the weevils plague the corn, and the mole-rats pollute the brook-bed, except for thee? Wherefore should the snow stick in the sky, save for shuddering fear of thee? 'Land of the wintry pole,' indeed! Why should the oily rivers creep unpurified of ice in their slimy serpentine beds except that the cold gods of purity disdain thee?

They are all in league with Taranis; never hath such a winter's season come to Britain, never land groaned under heavier woe! Thou clingest to thy whelp's life as a leech—yea, leech thou art to Britain's sucked-up heart, devourer of thy land and thy people! Here under this Oak-Tree came the awful curse on us from thee; when thou payest here under this Tree thy debt to the cheated Taranis, then, and not till then, will Britain be freed from her curses! I swear it by the Egg-of-the-Serpents, which I tore from the dead hand of Dallan!"—and, wrenching the sacrosanct charm from its long hiding-place in his girdle, he thrust it with violence against Dunwallo's wildly beating heart.

The aged man leaned back exhausted, his breast heaving with its torrent of delirium. The fetid breath of that dense winter in Britain turned more than one man toward madness. This half mad and wholly fanatical priest had not escaped the sword of Suetonius for naught. With such seed-corn of fierce Druidism existent,

that intense barbaric faith might again find full field in Britain.

Coran's hearers were visibly affected. The four Druids muttered together, stealing murderous looks toward Dunwallo. He, poor youth, was affected most profoundly of all. The full watery moon showed his face as pallid as a ghost's, his great eyes staring into vacancy. Presently he spoke.

It was the fruit of much melancholy brooding, fertilized by the sick ghastliness of the season, and ripened suddenly by the blaze of Coran's wrath. In Dunwallo spoke the voice of a martyr, unremembered now, yet worthy of a place beside those who later died in the highway at Oxford. His voice was low but steady; his face had the grandeur of a god.

"Father Coran, it comes to me that thou art right. And I am ready to pay the forfeit for my people."

The old priest leaped to his feet with the agility of a cat; the four other Druids lumbered clumsily to theirs. Dunwallo remained seated.

"Say it again!" screamed the unfrocked priest—"Say what mine ears have seemed to tell me!"

"I say it," answered Dunwallo. "Here and now will I pay forfeit for my people!"

One of the men said, hollowly:

"Dunwallo, well spoken! It is due that thou shouldst die and save the people. Thy life is truly forfeit to the gods."

In this they all gloomily concurred.

Coran sealed him with the deadly Anguineum. They bound him with their leathern girdles to the Tree, his arms outstretched so that his body formed the figure of a cross. They discussed the place where they might sink his corpse in the Avon, and escape the detection of the Romans. Coran was feverish with excitement, while Dunwallo, his eyes closed, remained to all appearance divinely calm. The five Druids finally stood out before him in the moonlight—Coran in the center, chanting the blood-curdling Death Song, his golden knife gleaming toward Dunwallo's throat. But listen!

A voice of singular sweetness and persuasion interrupted the unholy dirge.

"My children!"

Coran wheeled around like a dervish, recognized by some strange intuition the figure of Caradoc standing there alone in the moonlight, and raised his murderous knife frenziedly upon the King.

But the weapon fell harmless from his hand as he huddled in a faint upon the ground. The four men fell back aghast.

Caradoc stooped, and with infinite tenderness ministered to the unconscious priest. When the sick man revived, Caradoc bade one of the Druids support him, then hastened to unbind Dunwallo. When each knew who the other was, they embraced and wept.

Suddenly Dunwallo tore himself from his ransomer's arms and fled like a deer toward the village. Imogen's father had come! The King, the Great King, had come home!

Caradoc stooped once more over the prostrate form of the priest, whose strength seemed utterly spent; and, laying the gaunt head with its horrible throbbing scar upon his knee, he bade the others,

filled with silent awe-struck wonderment as they were, to summon all the slumbering peasants within call.

His request fairly electrified their feet.

"The children! Especially the children!" Caradoc cried after them.

"Come!" he called to his two Roman servants, who at his bidding had remained unseen in the background. They came forward bearing bundles of gifts.

Coran showed signs of reviving strength. Pillowing the old priest's head on wrappings from one of the bundles, Caradoc arose to complete his preparations for the first British Christmas.

But he stood still, stricken with joy.

"Eigen!" he shouted, in a voice loud with wonder and gladness.

It was not Eigen, it was Imogen, standing in the rim of the Yuletide fire, clasping Dunwallo's hand.

With a cry she sprang into her father's arms.

"It is Imogen!" she sobbed, on his breast.

Kissing her happy tears away, the

Christmas King held her at arm's length to enjoy her wonderful beauty.

"Blessed Day-Star, I had thought thou wert Eigen!" he said, tremulously. "Thou art as she was when first I beheld her—O radiant Imogen!"

Once more she nestled her head upon his heart.

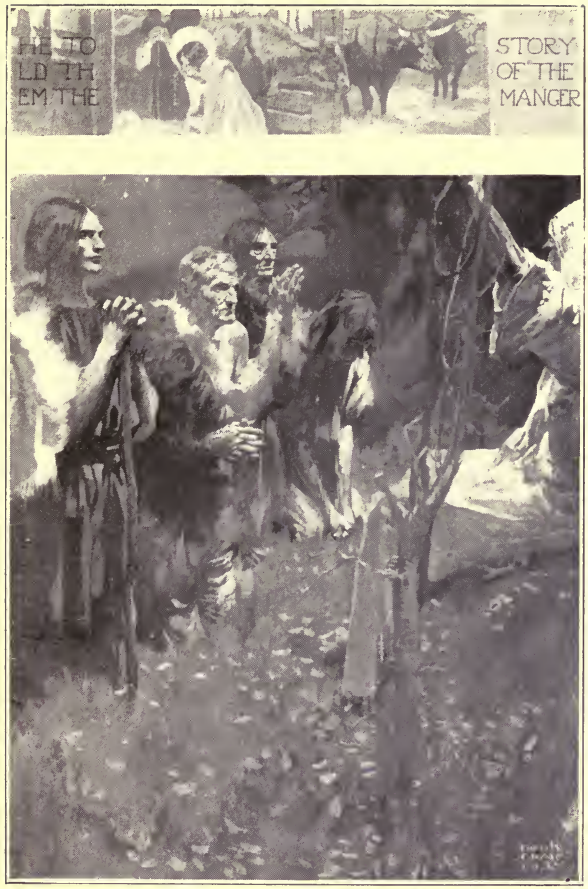
"I had thought that He who had brought life and immortality to light had given back to me thy mother in her youth," he went on, reverently. "That might not be. But indeed thou hast come back from the grave of lost hopes, O radiant Imogen, to renew my own youth within me!"

In the firelight the King's face shone with joy.

Dunwallo would fain have checked his mother, the white-haired Myfanwy, who had followed the two up the hill from the hut; but she rushed past him, throwing herself prone on the ground and kissing Caradoc's feet.

His voice was infinitely tender.

"Rise, O Myfanwy, I have somewhat to tell thee!"



"He told them the story of the manger"
From a drawing by Frank Craig

By this time the huddling villagers were collecting in a great wonder-struck ring about Caradoc's Oak, bringing with them hordes of smudge-faced children, clad in ragged smocks and untanned wolf-skins. The summoners, now breathlessly returning themselves, had stirred every neighbouring household with the message:

"The King has come back! Bring the children to Caradoc's Oak—and hasten!"

Purifying snow had begun to fall. This brought added joy to these poor people, affrighted as they were of the plague.

"Sit ye about me on the ground," commanded Caradoc, seating himself on an unsacrificed Yule log, close up against the trunk of the Oak. Imogen nestled in his right arm's embrace.

"I have come back to you at the Yuletide at the cost of my kingly crown. My freedom I purchased, my children, to lead you to serve the Prince of Peace."

"The Prince of Peace! What a name!" muttered the fierce old priest of Taranis, gazing wide-eyed into Caradoc's face.

"Yes, my children," continued the great Nursing-Father. "He purchased the

peace of his people by the forfeit of his life upon the Tree."

Dunwallo shifted to a kneeling posture, his hands clasped as in prayer. Coran would have struggled to his feet, but a gesture from Caradoc restrained him.

"Why!" exclaimed the old Druid, "we were about to claim the forfeit of Dunwallo!"—and when Caradoc had heard the story of the young man's voluntary sacrifice, he looked on him and loved him, and told them the story of the Cross.

"I had thought it was only the fondness of memory that lured me by way of the Oak. I longed to stand under this Tree, where I parted with the glory of the past. Now I know I was sent here. I was sent to the Oak as your Daysman, to set you at one with Immanuel, and to turn your somber Yuletide into Christmas."

"Christmas—what is Christmas?" murmured Dunwallo.

"Christmas is redeemed childhood," answered Caradoc. "It was the unknown touch of Christmas in my heart that set you free from Taranis a score of years

ago"—and he told them the story of the Manger.

"Christmas is redeemed motherhood," the gentle evangelist went on, smiling toward the white-haired Myfanwy, whose very soul was shining in her eyes; and he pictured to their minds the Virgin Mother.

"Christmas is a redeemed world," the King continued, and his voice rang out to the outermost ring of the people surrounding the Oak. "Chiefly it is the redemption of our joy." He kissed Imogen with great tenderness upon her brow. "It turns our age to youth again, our ugliness to beauty, and all our outward sorrows to an innermost delight. It takes the whole wide world and makes it new again, with a gift like the ministry of snow. There was that in your old religion, faithful Coran, which it will possess and transform. A Father takes the place of Taranis, and Christ shall become your Druid. There is never a truth or beauty in the world but Christmas will welcome them and mould them to itself with fragrant freshness. So the coming centuries will cherish the sacrament of sacrifice, though Christmas al-

tars never feel the stain of blood. Even your Oak"—and he waved his hand upward—"will surrender his sacred All-Heal, and the Yule log will burn on the hearthstone, and the greenery of forest gods shall wave,—not as signs of dark and helpless fear, but to bid the new-born world a merry Christmas!"

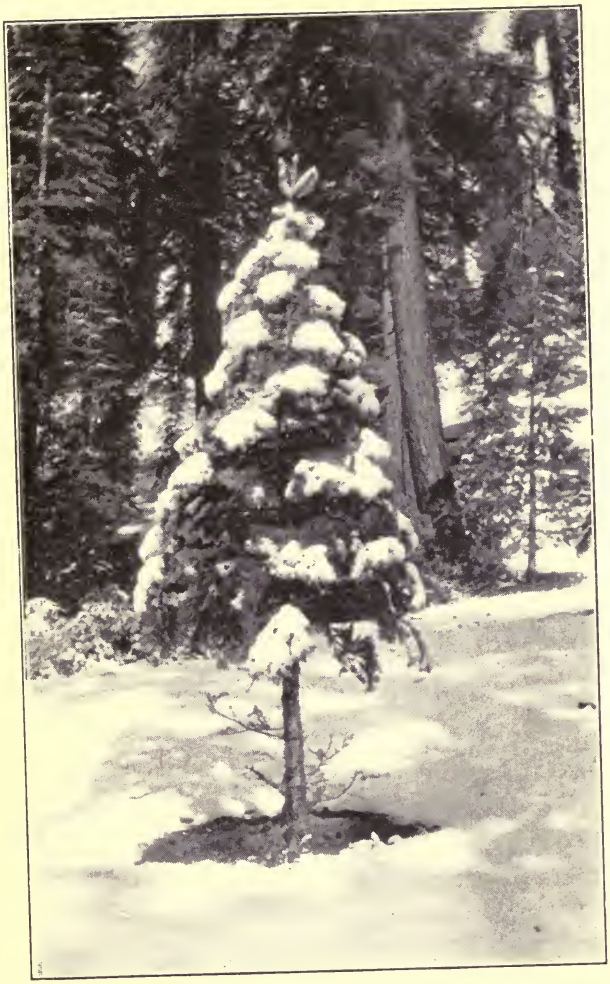
And he told them how the trembling shepherds heard the first Christmas words, "Fear not!"

"Imogen!" he suddenly cried, buoyantly leaping to his feet with the lithe spring of youth—"Come! the children!"

It was high dawn. The maiden caught the spirit of Christmas as Caradoc pointed to the open bundles of Saturnalian toys, and then toward the nestling groups of children.

But he looked up at the bare cheerless boughs of the Oak and shook his head. In the growing light he could see its charred trunk, blackened by a second and a third stroke of lightning, and blacker now than ever against a background of softly falling snow. He shook his head, smiling.

Imogen smiled back at him.



"The first Christmas tree"
From a photograph by Isabel Mosher

"Not here!" she said. "Let us go out into the dawn!"

So they came out from under the Oak, Dunwallo aiding the Roman servants with the bundles of toys, and the Druids stirring fresh Yule logs into a towering flame, merrily crackling.

The people pressed back but little. Sobs of joy were heard on every side, and many stooped to kiss the hem of the King's simple garment. Children so clung about his knees that as he moved they moved forward with him.

"See!" cried the radiant Imogen, joyfully dancing, her eyes agleam with some fresh thought of delight, her cheeks dimpling in the Yule log's merry glow, as she pointed to a slenderly graceful young fir-tree, sparkling with snow crystals as with unnumbered jewels—"Let us festoon the children's gifts among its boughs!"

Dunwallo exchanged a swift glance of understanding with Imogen. He felt as if his pall of gloom had dropped from him, nevermore to return. They were thinking of the fir-trees at Colchester through

whose boughs they had heard the Gift of Music.

Caradoc noted the unmistakable glances of youth in love, and smiled with a wise new tenderness. So he and Imogen and Dunwallo and even old Coran hung the Saturnalian toys among the boughs of the fir-tree, to the merry laughter of rollicking children, amid shouts of delight from their elders.

"Father!"

It was the first time Imogen had spoken the beautiful word. Her hands clasped behind Caradoc's neck, she looked up into his smiling eyes with unutterable radiance.

"I love Dunwallo!"

Caradoc kissed her gently on the lips.

"Clip me the Golden Bough, the Mistletoe!" he cried to old Coran. This hoary mystical plant should bespeak a new freedom, a more abundant life, alike to Princess and peasant.

With trembling limbs, assisted by the four eager Druids, the breathless priest climbed to the lowest bough of the blackened Oak, and cut with Dallan's golden knife the only living thing upon the tree.

Meanwhile Dunwallo, as if in a trance, had stepped slowly forward at the summons of Caradoc, who laid Imogen's right hand within his.

" 'There is neither bond nor free,' " the Christian King murmured, " 'but ye are one!' "

Dunwallo and Imogen were standing in front of the fir-tree, and as Coran came running with the mistletoe bough, Caradoc waved it above their heads.

"Liberty—love—life," were three words he uttered as if in benediction. Dunwallo and Imogen plighted their troth with a kiss. The sun suddenly shot up over the boundless forests to eastward, precisely as on the dawn of that far-away May day morning, and lit up the world with strange splendour.

"Father!" cried Imogen, rapturously pointing toward the dazzling little fir-tree, surrounded by dancing children; evergreen with fresh life, as free as it was fresh, and to her heart fragrant with love,—

"It is the Tree of Light!"

THE END

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